

FROM THE TRENCHES

Possibility, Need, and Educational Reform

by Edward G. Rozycki

Impossibilium nulla obligatio est.

—There is no obligation to do impossible things.¹

Three common principles of need:

Option, probability, possibility

If all you need is a ride to work, even if cost is no object, you don't *need* a chauffeur-driven limousine *unless absolutely no other option is available*. As a rule, available options constrain what we can reasonably claim to need. So normally, we don't *need* a red fountain pen to merely write a note, or an HDTV to catch the nightly news.

None of us Earthlings needs an antidote for poisons encountered only on the moons of Jupiter. This is a second principle for judging need: low probabilities undermine our claims of need. So it is that most Americans do not need mustache wax, or a Hittite-Sumerian translating dictionary.

If you tell me you need to know the whole number that comes between seven and eight, I can tell you that there is no such number. Consequently, you can't *need* to know what you thought you did. Impossibilities preclude any claim to need.² So it is that you can't *need* a special cape to help you fly like Superman, or a vitamin to help you predict the future. (Even were we to encounter people who believed they could fly, or prognosticate, we would not say that they needed such things, but only they *believed* so.)

Reform Rhetoric: Objective vs. advocated needs

Educational reformers of all stripes rely heavily on unexamined notions of *possibility* and *need* to promote their programs. Slogans involving such concepts as “a student's potential” (which begs obvious questions of possibility) and “at risk” (which circumvents investigations into need) often provide the foundation of argument for even more reflective reform theorists.

Part of the problem with the notion of *potential*, of course, is that there is often little agreement, even among experts, about a student's capabilities at any point in his or her life. And evaluations of risk presume consensus on what goals are desirable.³

Also, advocates for particular educational reforms employ a kind of rhetorical sleight-of-hand to make the case for their proposals: they muddle a useful distinction between *objective needs* and *advocated needs*. Objective needs are matters of logic or physics whether or not anyone cares about them. Gasoline is an objective need for most automobiles to function whether or not we care that cars function. Explosive devices and instruments of harm are needed to promote terrorism. This is true despite our not wanting to see terrorism promoted.

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Advocated needs are objective needs tied to advocated goals. The point of treating advocated needs as if they were “merely” objective is that it helps hide the fact that we are advocating the goals. For example, “service to the community” comes across as highly desirable in most discussions about possible student activities: *Perhaps*, thinks an advocate, *I can hitch my particular wagon, “service learning,” to that particular star*. Declaring things as “needs” where associated goals are controversial often helps avoid deeper questions of option, probability, and possibility.

Educational Reform: The supporting dogmas

There are a number of beliefs that, though lacking scientific or even deep philosophical support, are invoked to keep schoolpeople working at tasks that wiser, more insightful persons might just consider beyond the range of our practical knowledge.

Across the country teachers—though seldom well trained in scientific method, bereft of acquaintance with causal theory, and lacking controlled conditions to conduct longitudinal experiments—are invited to speculate on the “causes” of the problem behavior of their students, with the proviso that any such causes be found *within the ability of the teacher to control*. This “functional behavioral analysis,” judged as generally successful via evaluations as haphazard as its training procedures, is one program that serves to bolster the hopes of educational reformers in the face of otherwise unpromising experience.

Another major phantasm driving public education reform in America is the idea that schools will improve when and to the extent

that teachers learn how to address the individual needs of each child. Which needs? They are not specified.⁴

How does a teacher know that a child's needs have not been met? It is when the child is disruptive or does not progress academically. The teacher is enjoined to do something, anything—not illegal, immoral, or, presumably, fattening—until the child behaves in class and progresses academically. Is it any wonder that teachers, especially special education teachers, drop out of the profession at such a high rate?⁵

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Perhaps the most bizarre Article of Educator Faith is the idea that educators should be constrained in their practice, not by research, or even moral tradition, but by what random intimidators in our society can force down the throats of all-too-often pusillanimous public school officials. Not far from where I live, a fifteen-minute video recorded a senior-class high school student selling drugs in the school building—one of that kind of fortress ringed outdoors with signs to the effect that the school is a No-Drug Zone and that offenders will serve jail time. When the principal informed the student's mother that her son would be excluded from graduation ceremonies, she immediately appealed to the school district CEO, a bright star in the constellation of nationally recognized educational reformers. The principal was told that because the mother had had a hard life, the boy would be permitted to walk in graduation. *Gaudeamus igitur, juvenes dum sumus!*

What do educators need to do?

Public educators in all ranks are told that, because of their professional training and position, certain duties befall them. They *need* to do certain things; otherwise, educational reformers will step in to help them do it.

Educators, everyone tells us, need to stop griping about insufficient resources and (in an allusion less and less recognized by the non-reading, television-oriented generations) take their fish and loaf of bread and feed multitudes. (Forget the water-into-wine business: controlled substances are out of the question!) Are the swine possessed by demons? Drive them not into the sea but, rather, into an inclusive classroom.

The reality: student needs are too many, too complex, and not generally agreed upon as a focus for educational effort. Therefore teachers either do not possess the means, or possess means of low probability of effect, or lack the practical options needed, to address so-called student needs. The upshot: school reform programs tend to destroy the need for school personnel to act as professional educators.

References

1. *Black's Law Dictionary*. 1998. 6th ed. (13th reprint), 756.
2. See Edward G. Rozycki, "Needs Assessment: A Fraud?" at <http://www.newfoundations.com/EGR/Needs.html>.
3. See *ibid.*, "Identifying the 'At-risk' Student" at <http://www.newfoundations.com/EGR/AtRisk.html>.
4. Suppose we used just Abraham Maslow's theory to specify needs. Would teachers be able to address anything in the first, second, or even third levels of his hierarchy?
5. See Richard M. Ingersoll, "Teacher Turnover and Teacher Shortages: An Organizational Analysis." *American Educational Research Journal* 37, no. 3 (2001): 499–534.

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